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Building Resilience through Adaptive Athletics

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Wheelchair basketball, or other adaptive sports, can provide a great opportunity to combine physical fitness with the social aspect that is inherent in team sports. It's a chance to be with other wounded warriors, who know better than most what you're going through.

What does resilience have to do with wheelchair basketball? A lot actually, because one way you can build, strengthen and maintain your spirit is through physical activity, especially a team activity.

Lately, there's been a lot of talk about resilience and why it's important. Being able to adapt and overcome daily challenges, tragedies, and difficult situations is a useful skill for everyone, particularly Sailors and Marines. It promotes readiness on both an individual and organizational level.

But, aside from just talking about what it is and why it matters, we also need to talk about what you can do to actually become more irrepressible, especially if you are a service member who has become ill or injured. The challenges that Sailors and Marines face during recovery and rehabilitation can be incredibly stressful, personally and professionally. Resilience can better prepare you to handle that stress and even come through it stronger than before.

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend a [Navy Safe Harbor](#) adaptive athletics camp and the [2014 Marine Corps Trials](#) where I met Sailors, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and other service members all participating in adaptive athletics programs. Not only were these service members building their spirit, they were thriving.

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Adaptive athletics are sports activities modified to meet the abilities of injured or ill service members. Almost any sport you can think of can be adapted including basketball, track and field, archery, swimming, and volleyball. Adaptive athletics, as well as other team sports, can help individuals build resilience because being active in sports helps maintain and improve physical health and develop social connections – both factors associated with their well-being.



Receiving training on chair usage for wheelchair basketball.

Physical activity promotes resilience for several reasons. Aside from giving off those “feel good” chemicals, endorphins, which provide a sense of well-being and a more positive attitude, exercise increases your strength and endurance while improving your overall health. This means that your brain and the systems that support it are healthier too and that can result in better mental focus and cognitive functioning. Add in that exercise helps you manage your weight and achieve fitness goals, you get a boost of confidence as well. In a nutshell, your physical health and psychological well-being are deeply intertwined.

After a major illness or injury, service members often feel as though they’ve lost so much. In addition to losing their health or perhaps a limb, ill and injured service members who are transferred to a new location to facilitate recovery may also lose the camaraderie they had with their unit. This sense of belonging is not just an important part of military service leading to unit cohesion, it also often becomes part of their identity. Losing that connection can often seem like losing another part of yourself. Adaptive athletics changes that by giving something back – the opportunity to be part of a team again.

A large part is developing a strong social network. Having people that you can laugh with, unburden yourself to, and rely on in times of need is essential to building mental toughness. Too often, service members, particularly those with non-visible illnesses and injuries, isolate themselves. The opportunity to have that sense of belonging and camaraderie again encourages them to get out and get back into civilization and regain that sense of unit cohesion.

Wheelchair basketball, or other adaptive sports, can provide a great opportunity to combine physical fitness with the social aspect that is inherent in team sports. It’s a chance to be with other wounded warriors, who know better than most what you’re going through. Adaptive athletics can really be a stepping stone to a much healthier and productive life.

Resilience is really a set of skills that you can learn and strengthen; one way to do that is through adaptive athletics. When you work on improving your physical and social health, when look for new ways to challenge yourself and set new goals, you’re also building your hardiness. It doesn’t mean you won’t have bad days or that you don’t get stressed, but it can make it easier to navigate the road to recovery, work through the challenges, and have fun while you’re doing it.

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